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A FRENCH CO-OPERATIVE HISTORICAL ENTERPRISE

ON several occasions the AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW has directed the attention of its readers to the volumes published by the Commission appointed under the Ministry of Public Instruction in Paris to collect and publish documents relating to the economic life of the French Revolution. This commission is at present directing the most important enterprise of co-operative historical work which has been undertaken in France for sixty years. I have thought that a brief account of the organization of this enterprise, its operation and the results obtained up to the present time might be of some interest to American students of history, and I extend my thanks to the AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW for kindly agreeing to accept the following pages on this subject.¹

At the sitting of the Chamber of Deputies on November 27, 1903, M. Jean Jaurès, the well-known public man, who is also a historian of great talent, proposed a preliminary appropriation for the classification and publication of the archive-documents bearing upon the economic history of the French Revolution. He showed the great value for the study of the origins of contemporary France of a systematic edition of the *cahiers de doléances* that were drawn up by cities and country districts in 1789 and submitted to the States-General, or of the documents relating to the question, still so little understood, of the sale of the nationalized property. In regard to agriculture, commerce, industry, etc., during the period of the Revolution, collections of texts published by the state would be the only means of placing at the disposition of historians desirous of going to the bottom of things the data indispensable to their work.

The proposition of M. Jaurès, eloquently presented and supported by deputies of various opinions, was adopted. Historians, too, gave it a warm reception. Up to that time the economic history of the Revolution had been greatly neglected in favor of the political, diplomatic, military and religious history. The study of its economic history presented many difficulties: the dispersion and disorder of

¹ For full details, see my articles relative to the commission in the *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, VI. 443, and VIII. 545. The journal called *La Révolution Française* regularly keeps its readers informed of the meetings and the work of the commission.

the documents, the lack of the elementary instruments of research and the almost complete obscurity of the main lines of the subject. An extensive, general examination of all material was needed, but it was foreseen that this would be long and costly, and there were no indications that it would be undertaken soon. From the Institute, little disposed to assume a task so heavy, and indifferent, if not hostile, to the period of the Revolution, nothing was to be expected. Neither was anything to be expected from the Comité des Travaux Historiques, a body much inclined to the same prejudices and not possessing the indispensable personnel and resources. As for the private societies—the Société d'Histoire de la Révolution and the Société d'Histoire Moderne—their slender resources rendered it impossible for them to assume such a burden. The state only could do what was required. The adoption of M. Jaurès's proposition, then, was a stroke of good fortune.

On December 23, 1903, the Minister of Public Instruction, in pursuance of this vote, appointed a special commission, with M. Jaurès as president. This commission immediately met and at its first sitting formed a permanent sub-commission of its own members to have charge of the preparation of the work. Provincial collaborators were also needed in order to collect and prepare for publication the documents preserved in the departmental archives. At the request of the commission, the minister appointed in the chief town of each department a committee of about twenty members, who, in their turn secured correspondents, especially from among the teachers, in the principal communes.

For two years past, this organization has not been modified. The commission, which was at first composed of twenty-eight members, now numbers forty-five, including senators, deputies, high officials, professors of history in the universities, archivists and men of learning. The personnel of the departmental committees has undergone many changes, but the professional historians and the archivists have kept everywhere the preponderant rôle which they played throughout the formative period.

The commission is connected with a bureau of the Direction of Higher Education. Legally, it possesses only consultative powers; it gives advice, which the administration is free to follow or not. As a matter of fact, the decisions of the commission are always carried out. The permanent sub-commission² holds its meetings

² The commission includes, in addition to the representatives of the administration, the following members: MM. A. Aulard, professor in the University of Paris; Camille Bloch, inspector-general of libraries and archives; A. Brette,

frequently. It is this body which dispatches current business; corresponds with the departmental committees; draws up the general and special instructions; weighs projects for publications; and superintends the printing. At periodic intervals, meetings of the whole commission are held, when the sub-commission reports on the work it has done, submits the instructions which it has formulated³ and the new propositions for publications that it has examined.

The departmental committees, naturally, do not manifest an equal degree of activity everywhere, but, on the whole, those which do good work are sufficiently numerous. Ordinarily, they hold four or five meetings a year. They organize documentary investigations, which their correspondents are to carry on; formulate projects for publications, which they transmit to the central commission; and receive communications relative to the local questions of the economic history of the Revolution. Several of these committees, thanks to voluntary contributions or to subventions made by the commission or by the general councils, have instituted periodical bulletins which have found both contributors and readers.

The programme of subjects to be investigated by the commission was the occasion of much discussion during the first year. As finally determined, it comprised the following:

Economic and industrial condition of France in 1789, especially as shown in the *cahiers* of the parishes, of corporations, etc. Professional associations and trades-unions. Liquidation of the arts and crafts associations. Feudal rights; their persistence and gradual abolition. Inventory of nationalized property (property of the Church and property of the émigrés), assets and liabilities; sale of such property; *assignats* and *billets de confiance*. Condition and changes in modes of production and exchange. Agriculture. Manufacturing and mining. Domestic and foreign commerce; custom-duties; privileged companies. Progress in industrial and agricultural appliances and technical processes. Payment of taxes during the Revolution. Subsistence: the maximum. Control and division of communal property. Movement of population in city and country. Enforcement and economic effect of the laws of the revolutionary period respecting the transmission of landed estates and the system of mortgages. Values and variations in wages and salaries. Unions. Measures of assistance.

member of the Comité des Travaux Historiques; P. Caron and Charles Schmidt, of the National Archives; E. Dejean, director of archives; Charles Seignobos, professor in the University of Paris. M. Aulard is the president and M. Caron the secretary.

³ These instructions are published in a *Bulletin Trimestriel* which has been issued since the beginning of 1906, and which contains, in addition to complete information in regard to the work of the commission and of the departmental committees, documents and original articles.

For its publications the commission has adopted a convenient octavo *format*. The printing has been done either at local establishments or at the National Printing Office in Paris. The volumes, whatever their size (often they exceed 800 pages), are sold at the very moderate price of seven francs, fifty centimes each. Many copies are distributed free of charge to scientific institutions. The commission enjoys an annual appropriation which was at first fixed at 50,000 francs, but, in 1906, was increased to 60,000 francs, and still remains at that figure. Every publication is supervised by a responsible manager selected from among the members of the commission.

As soon as the details of organization and administration were settled, the commission applied itself to determining the categories, the contents and the arrangement of the various series. At this point the difficulties began. The documents to be published formed an immense mass, scattered among a number of depositories, such as the national archives, the departmental archives, the communal archives, libraries, offices of judicial records, etc., and there was no general inventory of them. Moreover, there were no general works on the economic history of the Revolution of such a sort as to make it easy to state with security its chief problems; there were few, if any, previous publications that could be taken as models. Everything or nearly everything had to be originated. All this gave rise to inevitable groping and delay.

Of all the undertakings that which seemed the simplest was the publishing of the *cahiers* of the parishes—so valuable for an understanding of the economic conditions of the country districts in 1789. Fortunately, we had already the large collection edited by M. Brette,⁴ relating to the convocation of the States-General; and numerous *cahiers* published prior to 1904, however imperfect they might be, made it possible to determine speedily the method to be followed. The unit chosen for this first category was the *bailliage*—that is to say, the unit of convocation in 1789; and all discoverable *cahiers de doléances* (at least, all that could be found), drawn up by parishes belonging in 1789 to the same *bailliage*, were gathered into one collection. On this plan the first publication of the commission was constructed—the *cahiers* from parishes of the *bailliage* of Orléans, edited by M. Camille Bloch.

For the publication of documents relating to another very important question, that of the sale of nationalized property and its social

⁴ *Recueil de Documents relatifs à la Convocation des Etats Généraux en 1789*, 3 volumes octavo and an atlas (Paris, 1894–1904). The fourth and last volume is in preparation.

and economic results, the commission at first thought that the department could be taken as the unit, but it very soon became apparent that this unit was too large, so that the investigation could not be thoroughly prosecuted. Then the unit was reduced to the district, that is, to a division of a department (between 1790 and 1795 each department contained on an average five or six districts). Of all the questions studied by the commission, none has been more difficult to handle than this; it required two years' hard work, and definite instructions could not be given to the editors until a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile, the commission had taken up other parts of its programme. The importance of the question of grain-supplies during the Revolution is well known; the trade in grain was the subject of a circular of instructions issued in 1907. The documents relating to this will be published according to districts and the first collection (devoted to the district of Chaumont-en-Bassigny) will be issued in 1908. Very recently, new instructions were drawn up relative to the editing of documents concerning agriculture. These will be published by departments. At present the commission is engaged upon the subjects of manufactures, commerce and measures of public assistance. The remaining topics will be taken up later.

The publications of the commission, then, as they continue to be issued, will form several large parallel series: collections of the *cahiers* of the parishes, collections relating to the sale of nationalized property, collections dealing with the grain-trade, and so on. Each series begins with the instructions issued by the commission, followed by a collection of texts of general bearing (laws, decrees, resolutions, circulars) and an account of the administrative organs charged with the application of the laws; then comes a series of departmental collections which will make it possible for historians to trace in detail the effect of the great economic measures taken during the Revolution. Besides these, the commission has planned and commenced the publication of collections of documents preserved at Paris which have to do with France as a whole, such as the reports of the committees on agriculture and commerce of the assemblies of the Revolution, published by MM. Gerbaux and Schmidt, the collection made by MM. Sagnac and Caron relating to the abolition of the seigneurial régime and that of M. G. Bourgin upon the division of communal property.

It is essential to note that the commission very soon recognized that, if it could not employ the same territorial unit in all its collections, neither could it systematically employ the traditional scheme of chronological limits used in political history. The dates 1789 and

the year VIII. usually mark the limits of the revolutionary era ; but these do not necessarily correspond to the decisive moments in economic development. According to the subjects treated in these collections, it is necessary to have an earlier starting point than 1789 or to stop short of the year VIII. or to proceed beyond that date. Thus, for the collection upon the grain-trade, the period studied extends from 1788 to the year V. For the series pertaining to manufactures, the initial date will also be 1788, the year of the reorganization of the Bureau of Commerce, but the date chosen for the conclusion will be 1802 at the very earliest and may be deferred to 1806. The collections which relate to the sale of nationalized property ought to extend still farther, to the Restoration, and to include the enforcement of the law of 1825 (concerning the indemnities to the *émigrés*), which marks the close of this great transaction.

In respect to the technicalities of publication, the commission has adopted the rules that the French editors of modern historical texts agree, with some exceptions, in following. It was deemed useless to retain fantastic peculiarities of the original spelling which, whatever may be said of them, are of no more interest from the philological point of view than from the historical, and, if they were preserved, would only result in rendering certain volumes unreadable. Modern punctuation has been employed, according to the sense. The introductions and annotations are concise and are intended only to facilitate the use of the volumes and to lessen the difficulties of the text. To develop the instructive relations between the data, to engage in the work of synthesis, is the function of historians. Far more important is it that the editors give their attention to sifting in some way the innumerable documents to be published (except in the case of the collections of *cahiers*), so as to retain nothing but the essential and to omit whatever lacks interest. Publication without selection is impossible, and, moreover, in no wise necessary. Furthermore, the commission prescribed, in the case of all matters that are of secondary importance or of interest only in part, the liberal use of those methods of summary, citation or reference, that will become more and more general in the editing of archive-documents in the domain of modern history. "A certain number of well-chosen examples, and general conspectuses, ought to form the substance of the collections", say the instructions for the publications relating to the grain-trade.

The actual statistics of publication are as follows : out of some sixty proposals submitted to the commission, thirty-two were adopted. These thirty-two publications are to form about forty-five volumes,

of which twenty have been issued and eight are in press to come out during the current year. Of these twenty-eight volumes, fourteen are occupied with the *cahiers* of parishes,⁵ two treat of the nationalized property⁶ and twelve of various subjects.⁷

These figures bear witness to a remarkable activity, and the commission has a right to feel that in three years it has accomplished much. Yet the way in which the work has been planned and is being executed has not failed to arouse certain criticisms, of which some words may be said in closing.⁸

One charge brought against the commission is that it publishes too many documents and not enough original studies—a charge rather amusing when directed against a commission which owes its existence to an act expressly stipulating that its work should be the collecting and publishing of documents. Is it alleged that, in general, the editing of archive-documents belonging to the modern period is of little value? This paradox can be sustained, like so many others. But the truth is that these publications of the commission are destined to render the greatest services: they place the fundamental texts at the disposition of all workers and not merely

⁵ *Cahiers* from the *bailliages* or *sénéchaussées* of Angoulême and Cognac, Orléans, Marseilles, the Cotentin, Châlons-sur-Marne, Vic (in Lorraine), Nîmes, Blois and Romorantin, Cahors, Sens.

⁶ In the departments of the Rhone and of Bouches-du-Rhone.

⁷ *Procès-verbaux des Comités d'Agriculture et de Commerce des Assemblées de la Révolution*, edited by F. Gerbaux and Ch. Schmidt (2 vols.); *Les Comités de Droits Féodaux et de Législation et l'Abolition du Régime Seigneurial* (1789-1792), documents edited by MM. Sagnac and Caron; *Le Partage des Communaux, Documents sur la Préparation et l'Application de la Loi du 14 août 1792*, edited by G. Bourgin; *Réponses de Paroisses de l'Élection de Gap au Questionnaire envoyé, le 28 février 1789, par la Commission Intermédiaire des États du Dauphiné*, edited by Abbé Guillaume; *Documents d'Ordre Économique contenus dans les Registres de Délibérations des Municipalités du District d'Alençon, de 1788 à l'an VIII.*, edited by F. Mourlot (2 vols.); *Documents relatifs au Commerce des Céréales, de 1788 à l'an V., dans le District de Chaumont (Haute-Marne)*, edited by Abbé Lorain; *Documents relatifs à l'Abolition du Régime Seigneurial en Savoie avant et pendant la Révolution*, edited by M. Bruchet; *Tableaux de Dépréciation du Papier-monnaie*, reprinted by P. Caron; *Recueil de Textes Législatifs et Administratifs sur les Domaines Nationaux*, edited by P. Caron and E. Deprez.

⁸ In order to estimate correctly the value of these criticisms, it is necessary to remember that French specialists in modern history are at present divided into two camps according to their political opinions: historians of the Right and of the Left. The enterprise of the commission, owing its origin to the initiative of one of the leaders of the Socialist party, and directed by historians known to be of democratic tendencies, is an undertaking of the Left, and, *a priori*, the historians of the Right are hostile to it. With reference to this regrettable division of French historians into adverse parties, I take the liberty of referring to an article which I published in 1905 in the *Revue de Synthèse Historique* (XI. 261), under the title: *Des Conditions Actuelles du Travail d'Histoire Moderne en France*.

of some ; they reveal, better than all the original studies in the world could have done, the importance of documents hitherto unknown, the value, for example, of the reports of the committees on agriculture and commerce ; finally, the publishing of the *cahiers* of parishes, the researches in the archives of even the smallest communes, will certainly do more than all official circulars to insure the safety of documents of great interest, which are too often exposed to the ravages of time and the carelessness of men, and the destruction of which had been going on slowly for a century.

Again, it is said that the publications of the commission, for example the collections of the *cahiers*, do not present a perfect uniformity ; and this has been remarked upon acrimoniously. It is undeniable that in the early volumes of the *cahiers* there may be noticed some trifling differences in procedure. This slight variation was inevitable in the period of inception ; the method to be followed could take final form only after a series of experiments. But to expect that absolutely perfect uniformity can ever be realized is purely chimerical. In the first place, the documents stand in the way of this, as they frequently differ according to the locality whence they proceed. In the second place, among the editors there will always be differing degrees of carefulness, of information, of ability. This disadvantage is inherent in all co-operative enterprises, yet co-operative enterprises are on the increase in the domain of historical study. What ought to be required of such enterprises is an average product. The commission endeavored to take into account everything : exigencies of scientific work, material possibilities of execution, capacities of available investigators, etc. It concluded that the best that could be done was to produce clear, well-composed collections, supplied with good indexes and with the critical apparatus necessary and sufficient to facilitate the use of the printed volumes. When the collaborators are men of exceptional ability, the commission grants them liberty equally exceptional, and makes no effort to deprive itself of the benefit of their learning and their enthusiasm. But it always has been and still is the desire of the commission that the publications be of good average value and, as cannot be too often repeated, that they conform to the principles generally followed to-day in the editing of modern archive-documents.

A work of this kind ought to be judged by its results. It is certain that as a result of the influence of the commission considerable progress promises to be accomplished within a few years.

Already attention is being directed to those economic and social questions, too long neglected by historians yet nevertheless of capital importance to an understanding of political history, especially of that of the French Revolution. Where learned societies of the old type were wont to slumber, the departmental committees have gathered together workers animated by a more modern spirit; at last, the general inventory of the archives of the Revolution has been commenced;⁹ the circulars from the central commission to the departmental committees and those from the committees to their correspondents have helped to hasten the general diffusion of knowledge in regard to historical methods. Even now, it is safe to say that the undertaking entrusted to the commission will in time be regarded as the most remarkable effort of French historical science at the beginning of the twentieth century. As such, it deserves to be brought to the especial attention of American historians.

PIERRE CARON.

⁹ The Administration of Archives has recently begun the publication of a general inventory of the principal series of documents of the Revolution preserved in the departments.